

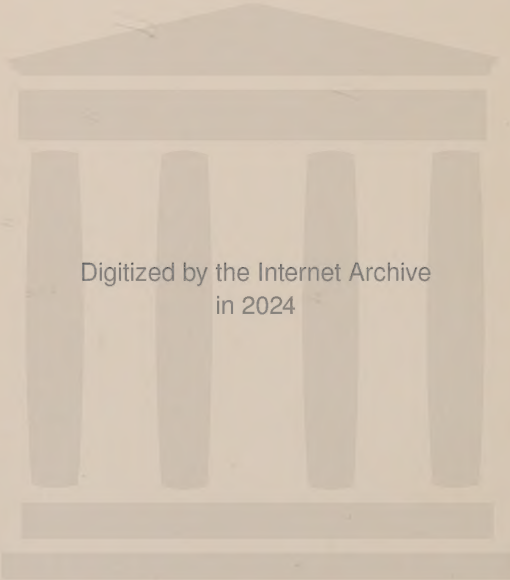


A Christmas when the West was Young

Cyrus Townsend Brady









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**A CHRISTMAS WHEN THE
WEST WAS YOUNG**



A Christmas when the West was Young

by

Cyrus Townsend Brady
Author of
The Island of the Stars
The West Wind, Etc., Etc.



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DEDICATED
TO ALL WHO HAVE BABIES
AND LOVE THEM

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Love & Welcome



A Christmas When The West Was Young

I

LOVE AND WELCOME

THE rude log hut stood on the brow of the low, tree-covered hill; a brook lined with undergrowth along its banks ran at its base. The sturdy arms of the young pioneer husband, wielding the ax, had cleared the slope of the elevation which looked across the creek toward the open, rolling prairie. The hillock, though it rose not more than fifty feet above the undulating surface, reminded them a little of New England, and the two young people had

turned to it instinctively so soon as they had seen it. They had been born in the hills and loved even their memory in this flat land.

The practical and the beautiful both attracted them. The rich earth around the brook would make a good garden spot. The grass range of the open plain would afford pasture for countless herds of cattle when the buffalo had been driven further westward by the advance of civilization. There were acres upon acres of desirable land which, in his mind's eye, the man could see covered with golden wheat or tasseled corn. The wooded hill would make house building an easy task. So, when the western journey of days and days ended, with a sigh of relief and a prayer of thanksgiving, there they pitched their tent. It was forty miles from the

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nearest settlement on the far flung frontier line, and that settlement itself was yet hundreds of miles from a slowly approaching railroad. Herds of game roamed the prairie, tribes of Indians hunted across it. There was peace between the white men and the red men, however; there was plenty of buffalo—food for all.

The horses and cows which had drawn or followed the big wagon across the plains were put to graze. The young wife, daily more indisposed to manual labor, sat on the first fallen log and watched the chips fly. The work of erecting a log cabin was heavy for one man, but this young Yankee was a resourceful lad. With ax and adz he hewed and shaped the logs. He had brought with him block and tackle, and with the aid of over-arching branches of trees he swung

the squared logs into place. Long poles formed the roof, which was covered with sod, and the unsightliness was hidden inside by the canvas cover of the wagon.

The man toiled unceasingly, with furious energy. He had to have a shelter for the woman and the expected baby. Something had to be planted—the ground broken, plowed, sowed for the winter store.

Some little time before they had been married, and in the spirit of youth and adventure had left the scrubby, stony, contracted farm of their native state for a departure into the unknown country of distances as illimitable as its possibilities. On the day they struck the tent by the side of the brook and entered the log cabin on the hill-top they thanked God that they had taken

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courage and made the effort. It was rude, primitive, without luxury, that frontier cabin of logs, and there was little beauty in it save the glory which love threw about; but it was reasonably comfortable, and it was home!

They had staked out claims, homesteaded, to the limit of the law, one for each, and a good acreage was in their name. Another claim was to be entered later for the third person who was about to come. For the rest, so far as the eye could see, they were alone save for the birds of the air and the beasts of the field—a new Adam and Eve in a new Eden. This had its greatest disadvantage in the hour of the woman's greatest need—as doubtless it had in primeval days!—for then no hand but his, unskilled and nervous, was there to minister to her. But for once the primal curse

was lifted a little, for more in joy than in sorrow to them a child was born, to them a son was given.

After that the man worked for two. Literally so, for until she was able to take her place and to do her share, he did the woman's work as well as his own. Fortune smiled upon them; the wheat ripened, the corn grew, the garden by the brook flourished. He brought chickens and a pig from the town. One of the cows calved, a little colt frisked at the heels of its mother. And because the woman had a baby, and because she was pretty and sweet and young, she planted flowers in the clearing from seeds and cuttings brought from the East, and roses bloomed about her door and in her cheeks as well.

Alone they continued, save for chance visits of grave Indians, who

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smoked solemnly with them, stared with intense interest at the little white baby, exchanged a haunch of venison or a buffalo hump or tongue or hide for beads and trifles and went their way. Once the peripatetic Bishop of All Outdoors, as he was called, stopped overnight on one of his far journeys across the vast country. That was a never-to-be-forgotten day when they took the baby down to the brook and in the primitive way poured the waters of Baptism upon his round little head, and thus added to his local habitation a Christian name!

They did not mind being alone. They were company for each other, and the baby supplied any deficiency in that respect. How the man loved to watch him, his little round head lying against his mother's breast as

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he drank his fill. It was worth all the toil and labor and anxiety to come back at night to see that picture. How happy they were there, in those days when the West was young.

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II

LOVE AND FAREWELL

THEN suddenly, how or why they could not tell, the baby who had been perfectly strong and well sickened. It was now winter. The weather had been generally mild as yet; adequate shelter had been built for the livestock; the harvest had been safely garnered; they thought they were ready for anything, and so, indeed, they were for everything but what actually happened. Ah, neither men nor women are ever ready for that.

They did the best they could, of course, but that was not much. The man remembered a wild, furious gallop to the frontier town in search for

the only physician for miles around; a wilder gallop back with the young doctor by his side. Rough and ready treatment, simple medicines, availed nothing. Prayers, petitions, heart breakings, agonizings, these availed nothing, either. The woman held to her breast at last a little form that was still; she laid against its warmth a little face that was cold; she drew up to her neck a little hand that fell away when she released it.

Oh, the agony of those moments! For what purpose had the child been given if now he was so swiftly and so suddenly to be taken away? Why do babies ever die? She looked from the still face of her little son to the set countenance of her husband and sought an answer. Alas, he could not give it. She sought illumination from the gray clouds above them, and from

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them she received no light. She even asked the question in her heart of God Himself, and, alas, even He did not make reply. The baby himself, she thought tenderly, might have whispered the secret to his bereft mother if only he could have spoken.

It was the morning of the second day before Christmas when the baby died. They buried him on Christmas Eve on the brow of the hill, looking over the ocean of open country. They had clothed him in the simple dress she had made for his Baptism, now grown quite too small for him. Of all the flowers, there was left in the house but a single rose, white; they laid that beneath the tiny hands. The man had dug the grave, had made the box and covered it over; he thrust into the mound a rude cross; from his lips fell the old, old words, "I am the

Resurrection and the Life." Centuries of hard life in her ancestry had given the woman the quality of repression. She stood silently, without a word or tear, but with clenched lips and heaving breast, while the man faltered through the service.

After completing this last terrible duty they went back over the little hill to the log cabin—the same cabin, but how different. They sat together before the fire, he with his arm around the waist of the woman, she with her head on his shoulder, and his other hand holding the hand that was closest to him. In silence, they watched the flames flare up and die away, coming and going like life itself; they spoke not, though they recalled every murmur, every babble, every little gesture, every —

And that afternoon he had to leave

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her. The Government Land Office required his presence, and tomorrow was the last day. If he reached the settlement that night he could transact his business and be back again the next day by noontime. Of the two evils, the latter seemed the better choice. There would be a Christmas package from the old home there for them, too. He would bring that back.

He explained it all to her. She nodded her head in dull acquiescence. He must go. He hated to leave her alone, he said, but she told him gently that she would never be alone again; that there would always be a little presence with her. Two or three times before he had left her, but never like this, and his heart was wrung within him that he had to go. He turned in his saddle again and again, watching the figure standing

in the doorway oblivious to the cold. He was too far away to see, but he could imagine how her eyes had wandered between the little cross-covered mound and his rapidly diminishing figure out on the prairie.

It was Christmas Eve, and they had planned to hang up the baby's stocking!



III

DEATH AND THE STORM

NIGHT was at hand when the man rode down the straggly street of the frontier town, but it was Christmas Eve and everything was wide open. His business was delayed because the Superintendent of the Government Land Office and the agent of the freighting company were both enjoying themselves with the rest, but he routed them out of the saloon at last and, by telling his plain tale of sorrow, got them to give the necessary time to enable him to transact his business. He refused invitations to join in the fun. It was after ten o'clock when all his affairs were settled. He could not make up his

mind to go to the tavern, or what passed for one, which was the center of the celebration. The big-hearted freight agent, appreciating his feelings, finally offered to let him pass the night on a shake-down in the freight office. He found it impossible to get to sleep for thinking of her and the baby.

About half-after six o'clock the day broke cold and gloomy. There was no sun. What light there was filtered through heavy banks of clouds that hung low on the horizon and were rapidly spreading overhead. The man made himself some coffee on the freight house stove, fed his horse, strapped the little express parcel, which had been left by the railroad three hundred miles to the east and brought to the town by wagon, to the pommel of his saddle on one

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side and to the other he tied a little branch of evergreen which the Superintendent of the Land Office had given to him from a Christmas tree which had arrived from the East several days before. In that country, devoid of pine, this little fragrant breath from his native hills was more welcome than the most gorgeous blossom of the hothouse.

He was well wrapped up. His overcoat was of buffalo hide; he wore a cap, home-made, of the same material, and huge fur gloves. At the last moment of parting his wife had brought him one of those white, knitted scarfs of the period, called nubias, which she wrapped about his neck. At other times he would have laughingly protested, but then he suffered her to do what she would without comment. He thought of it

whimsically as he tied it about his shoulders now. His rifle was slung across his back by a strap, and a heavy, old-fashioned revolver swung in a holster from the saddle.

The town, worn out from its nearly all-night celebrations, was yet asleep as he rode down the silent, empty, straggling street and started out on the broad prairie that extended between him and the hill of his home, upon which the house of his heart was raised. The good horse knew that he was homeward bound and that rest and ease and comfort awaited him at the end of the journey, and he cantered gallantly over the prairie.

There was no wind to speak of, and yet every once in a while it seemed to the man that a sound like a deep sigh vibrated across the plain, as if some spirit of the storm were

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awakening with long breaths between longer pauses. After a time, a breeze swept across him and grew stronger, and the black clouds lowered more darkly.

Halfway on the journey he came upon a deep rift in the earth caused by a small river. A practicable trail led for five or six miles through this rift—a trail he had discovered by chance and always used in going to and fro. The rift, or ravine, was a freak of nature, and a dangerous one. Riding across the prairie in the dark, it might be come upon without warning and the unfortunate rider and horse would be thrown to the depths, twenty, thirty, or perhaps fifty feet below. But there were places where the descent was easy, and down one of these places he put the horse.

It had grown much colder during

the night. The narrow, sluggish river was frozen solid from bank to bank, but he did not trust himself to the ice. He rode along the bank. He had proceeded some two miles through the rift when the noise of rifle shots was borne to him faintly in the morning air. The sounds were so unusual, so unexpected, so unaccountable, that he could scarcely credit the evidence of his ears. He checked his horse and listened. There was no mistake about it. They came from beyond him and from overhead, as if they had been caught by the wind and brought backward, and then dropped down upon him.

He had been going slowly, saving himself and his horse for the fierce conflict with the storm which would be inevitable on the uplands. Now he hurried on. After a rapid gallop of

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about half a mile through the twisting ravine he came upon the tragedy—the fag ends of it, that is.

Right in front of him stood a big emigrant wagon. Smoke was curling out of the back of it, which was turned toward him so that he could not yet see what lay ahead. Across the river a plumed and painted figure spurred his pony recklessly up the slope, and, as the man stared, as yet uncomprehending, another rifle shot rang out, this time with startling suddenness. The Indian fell from his pony and came rolling down to the river, and lay motionless on the ice.

It all happened in a few seconds. The astonished man passed the wagon and drew rein in front of it. The horses had been shot, and lay dead in their traces. On the high box seat of the wagon was the huddled up form

of a woman; on the ground reclined a man, his back resting against the near wheel. Three motionless Indians were sprawled on the trail a little distance away and in front of him. The man was deathly pale. Blood was staining his heavy woolen hunting shirt through a hole in the breast. An old-fashioned revolver lay on the ground by his side and a heavy rifle lay extended across his knees.

The newcomer leaped from his horse. One glance at the woman on the high seat had told him that she was dead or had fainted. The eyes of the man on the ground by the wagon wheel were open; he was yet alive.

The young settler bent toward him and the man tried to speak. He looked at the newcomer out of his bright blue eyes and strove vainly to tell some story, to convey some mes-

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sage. Finally two words escaped from his lips:

“The — baby — !”

His spirit went out with the words. The high resolution that had held him up, that had enabled him to fight off his assailants until they had killed his wife and shot him to death, failed him at last. He tumbled forward and sideways, helpless, dead!

After drawing him away from the wagon wheel, the young man laid him carefully along the ground. Then he turned to the woman. Had she only fainted? He prayed so, but there was something in her position that filled him with sickening apprehension. He stepped up on the tongue of the wagon, braced himself, and lifted her down in his arms. One look at her face confirmed his foreboding. She had been shot in the heart. Then

he glanced at the horses; they had been riddled with bullets. He walked forward to the Indians. Each one of them was stone dead. In his fall one had broken a glass bottle which he had carried in the pouch at his side. The odor of whisky still hung in the air. The man examined the bodies of the others hastily, and each had a whisky bottle almost empty. With that clue he could easily reconstruct the catastrophe.

The young settler turned away from the Indians again to the man and woman beside the wagon. In the startling suddenness of the tragedy, he had overlooked for the moment what the man had said; but, as he stood pondering, a thin, small wailing broke the silence. He started as if he had been struck. It was a human voice, a baby's cry, as if it had been

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his own baby! He had heard such a wail often. He stepped upon the wagon tongue again and peered over the box seat into the wagon bed. A shapeless bundle lay on the straw beneath. He stooped down and lifted it up, opened the heavy blanket wrapped about it and stared into a baby face.

Stepping down from the wagon, he carefully laid the baby on the ground. Something was on fire in the wagon. A stray bullet had perhaps struck off a kindling spark and the wagon, which had been smouldering when he came up, was now suddenly filled with roaring flames. There was no water, for the river was frozen. There was no way to put the fire out.

Again, how was he to dispose of the bodies? He could not bury them in

the rock of the ravine. He could not take them with him. If the river had not been frozen he might have sunk them; but to leave them there on the bank would be to expose them to the prairie wolves and the coyotes. He heard the shrill bark of one of them now on the upland.

There was but one thing to do. He lifted the two bodies up one by one and placed them carefully in the burning wagon. It was filled with inflammable material and they would soon be incinerated. Before doing this he searched quickly but thoroughly for some evidence of name or station on the bodies, but found nothing except an initialed wedding ring and an unmarked silver watch.

He had done all that he could for them. He must look to himself and the child now. Fortunately, the baby

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was not only warmly dressed, but was also wrapped in several thicknesses of a warm and heavy blanket. With some of the leather straps cut from the wagon harness the man strapped up the little bundle and hung it around his neck in such a way that he could hold it steady with his free hand. Then he mounted his horse, watched the flaming wagon for a moment or two, breathed a prayer, and rode on.

God & the Baby



IV

GOD AND THE BABY

IT was Christmas Eve, and they had planned to hang up the baby's stocking! How that thought had beat into the brain of the woman. There had been something to occupy her during the hours of the afternoon in which she was alone. There were certain duties that had to be attended to. If one turned from food, from drink, from sleep, there were others dependent that had to be fed. The livestock accumulated during the spring and summer had to be cared for. She found strange comfort in the presence of the cattle, especially the milch cow and the young calf. The sight of them filled her with a

strange sort of envy at that picture of mere animal motherhood they presented.

There were household duties within the cabin as well as without. The duties within were harder to discharge than those in the open had been. Indeed, if she had consulted her own inclination, she would not have reëntered the house at all. Empty though it was, it was filled with associations of the baby that was gone, and yet, without or within, she could no more escape from those associations than she could flee from the presence of God. The presence of God! Was there, oh, was there, a God? She had never doubted before, but the question would rise to her lips, though she gave it no utterance.

Then she forced herself to go with-

in. There was the baby's cradle, in which he had lain warm for so many nights and cold for one. The same hand that had reared the cabin had shaped the quaint, old-fashioned little bed for the child. She remembered how she had watched him do it in those hours of expectation before her birth agonies came on. Tears had filled her eyes as she watched him gravely but with great happiness in her soul, and tears filled her eyes now with a sadness as correspondingly great. She was not a demonstrative woman. She clenched her teeth, flung the thought back. She forced herself to go to the little cradle and smooth out the bedding, so soft, so sweet, so clean, so fresh, where he had lain so warm and once so cold. A character less stern, less self-controlled, less absolutely restrained,

would have put that cradle out of sight, but not she. They had laid the little body away in the ground, but somehow it was not there. There was a God, surely, and He and the baby were in the room.

The sun went down in a blaze of glory, out of sympathy, at first she thought, with her mood, but on second thoughts perhaps it was not the glory of this world that was indicated by that shining orb. The shadows lengthened, dusky twilight stole over the fields before the hill. The darkness presently rolled like a wave over the vast expanse of the prairie. She lighted the lamp. She went over to the set of shelves, pulled aside the curtains—white, for white was the color for babies and angels—and looked again upon the little garments that she had made. She choked down

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a dry sob. With eyes blinded she reached her hand within and drew forth one of his little knitted stockings. She took it to the fireplace. She hung the stocking over a nail in the broad half log that formed the mantel shelf. For this hour they had brought with them from the East trinkets, saved by loving hands from their boyhood and girlhood days—trifles, but heavy with love. These she thrust into the stocking, and the little knitted covering hung bulging in the light cast by the fire and the lamp. It was Christmas Eve, and she had hung up the baby's stocking!

That was the room in which they slept. From her lonely bed she watched it hanging there through the long night. The ever diminishing light cast by the dying fire showed her the faint outlines until toward the

very early morning. Then it completely died away, and left the room in darkness.

She could not sleep, she did not want to sleep. She had not prayed; there had seemed to her nothing left to pray for, and had it not been for the baby's little face that sometimes came smiling to her out of the night, she would have doubted if there were a Being to Whom to pray.

Toward morning she left her bed, wrapped the shawl about her shoulders, and barefooted, clad only in her nightgown, she went to the door. She opened it and stared without.

The night was far spent, the day was at hand, a faint grayness bordered the eastern horizon. Low before her, blazing in the translucent pearl of the cold sky, was the great star of morning. It was Christmas

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Day. So had a star blazed over Bethlehem, before wondering eyes, centuries before. Shepherds in the fields had noticed it. Wise Men from the East had followed it. Kings on their thrones had inquired about it. There was no mention of it in Holy Writ, but surely women, too, had marked it. At least it seemed so to her. Perhaps by the grace of God had come to suffering women who, as she, stared at it, some faint instinctive premonition that the star blazed for them, and that He who was presently to be born was to be more than all the rest of the world to mothers. Oh, if He had been for mothers, why had He taken her baby?

From where she stood, by turning her head, she could see the little mound, but she would not look that way. She kept her eyes fixed ever on

the star. As she watched, clouds came. Christmas was to be a gray day after all. It was so still, as still as it must have been before the angel choir of the past broke the silence of the Judean hills with its heavenly music. Presently, with the softly spreading clouds, the wind came. She was suddenly conscious that she was cold. She shivered a little as she stood by the open door, watching. So Mary might have watched, before that Christmas morning, the star whose meaning even she so dimly knew.

The woman at last went into the house, and stopped by the empty cradle a moment. She kissed the stocking hanging before the fireplace. "Merry Christmas" she whispered, softly and sadly, sending her message to her baby out into the infinite, confident that he would hear.

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Presently she dressed herself, rekindled the fire, and went about her daily tasks, thanking God that she had these tasks to do and wishing that they were harder and that the demand upon her was greater. If it had not been for the baby and God—she had decided at last that He was there—she would have died with the loneliness.

After everything was done and there was nothing more to occupy body and mind, she went outside, wrapped in the old shawl, sat down on the bench, and stared across the prairie in the direction whence her husband must come. She could see nothing of him, of course, it was too early for him, yet she waited and watched until she could bear it no longer.

She turned and went across the hill

to the little mound at the edge of the trees. She had buried her baby where the sunlight could fall upon him, not in the shadow. She knelt down over the little grave and put her face in her hands. That was not enough. She stretched out her arms and fell gently forward, and embraced the small mound of earth with her arms. She laid her cheek against it; it was so cold, and he must be cold. She could warm them both, perhaps!

What strange madness possessed her thoughts as she clasped the place where he lay. She had eaten nothing, but the awful soul hunger that filled her being could not be satisfied with earthly food. The pain in her full, undrawn breasts, which otherwise had distressed her almost beyond endurance, was forgot because of the greater pain in her heart.

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It was Christmas Day, the day on which to the Sons of Men and the Daughters of Women a Son had been born, a Child had been given. But not to her. She was alone.

Something cold fell upon her cheek. She opened her eyes, she rose to her knees and looked about her. The air was filled with whirling, sudden snow. She got to her feet and went back to the door, and stared over the prairie. She could scarcely see even as far as the foot of the hill. All the earth was covered, the sky and the air were filled with white. Then, and not until then, did she forget the baby. The man, so brave, strong, true, tender, the baby's father, was out there in the snow. God help him! There was no hesitation this time. Standing there, already white with the crystals of the sky, she

stretched out her arms, and prayed and prayed and prayed. For the first time that day the living took the first place in her heart.

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V

THE RIDE AND THE LIGHT

THIS overwhelming tragedy, fraught with such consequences to this modern Samaritan, had occupied scarcely ten minutes, yet it had changed the course of life for him. He rode more carefully now, but urged his horse on until he reached that part of the rift where it was necessary to leave it and strike straight across the prairie to his home. On clear days he could distinguish the hill rising above the rolling country. That morning, however, he could see but a few miles ahead. Off to the south, the direction in which he must go, the air was filled with a strange, unearthly whiteness. The wind had

momentarily died down, but as he stared ahead he felt a faint puff or two against his face, the air suddenly seemed desperately cold, and scattered flakes fell on the dark fur of his sleeve. He had scarcely time to mark them before the air was filled with snow and the storm broke around him with tremendous force.

The word "blizzard" had not yet been invented, but the thing it signifies is very old. This was such a storm as he had never in all his life experienced. He had time to mark but one thing: that the storm came straight from the point at which he aimed. Landmarks were obliterated as if rubbed out by a mighty hand. The whirling snow beat upon him, the shrieking wind ripped and tore at him, the earth seemed to rock and quiver beneath the feet of the horse.

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It was as if the man and the beast were fighting a battle against some titanic force. What kept him up was the thought of the terror and anxiety of that woman waiting upon the hill in the very heart of the driving tempest—that, and the remembrance of the other little life lying at his breast as he struggled on.

He took the nubia of which he had thought so whimsically and wrapped it about his face, covering all of it except his right eye, which he could protect a little if he turned the left side of his face to the wind. He was deeply thankful for that fantastic, foolish scarf before he got through that day. He reasoned at first clearly enough, for the cold had not yet benumbed him. He knew that his direction lay in the teeth of the storm. He put his whole mind, there-

fore, on forcing the horse into the very jaws of the tempest.

Sometimes he would stop and strive to listen and look, but it was impossible. There was nothing to do but plod blindly forward. He had never before used the whip and spur on that brave horse, but now he drove him on and on, the raw flesh quivering under lash and rowel.

He did not spare himself any more than he spared the horse. The cold penetrated to the very bone and dulled the man's senses. He ceased to think or to reason, but because he had so impressed upon his mind a certain purpose, he followed it instinctively. And somewhat of his purpose seemed to be communicated to his horse, for at length he did not strive, as he had at first, to turn his back. He put his head down and

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plodded slowly on—for how many minutes, for how many hours, the man could not tell.

The reins at last fell from his numbed fingers. At the same time the horse stopped. The cessation of the movement aroused the man. By a desperate effort he summoned his will power back to life. He lifted his head and stared about him. The storm did not beat upon him with quite such terrific force as before. The tempest did not appear to be abating, but it was as if he had found some kind of shelter. He strove to think what it could be. Finally, as if impelled, he lifted his eyes upward. There before him, in the gray darkness of the day—what hour it was he did not know, although he dully perceived that it was growing dark—he saw a light, just a spot of pale

yellow radiance in the snow-filled air. Was it a real light? He drew the nubia from his face to see with both eyes. Aye, it was a blurred, wavering glimmer, but it was a light. Could it be a star? A star had led the Wise Men of old across the world. He remembered, vaguely, that it was Christmas Day. Yes, that was a light—a light just above him. He must inquire into it; he must see what it was; he must get near to it.

He spoke to the horse again, and struck and spurred him. There was no response. The brave animal was done for; he could carry his burden no longer. The man reflected quickly. In spite of the excruciating pain involved in the descent, he managed to slip from the saddle. Still holding the snow-covered bundle closely to his breast, he seized the bridle with his

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benumbed left hand and staggered forward. The poor horse, relieved of his burden, made a valiant effort to follow, and horse and man stumbled up a gentle ascent.

The light grew brighter. It was crossed by bars of some kind. No, it was not a star, it came through a window, the window of a house. What house? He could see the corners of the logs through the snow. Where there was a window there should be a door. Instinctively he turned toward it, and fell heavily against it and lay there, the bundle close to his breast, the horse's bridle still clutched in his freezing hand.



VI

LIFE AND LOVE

THE man did not know what followed. He did not know how the door was torn open, how he rose unsteadily and with a last effort pitched forward, bundle and all, into a frantic woman's arms; or how he was dragged into the house. The poor horse was brought in, too; needs must, since the man's icy hand still clutched the bridle.

He awakened on his bed to find himself staring up into the face of his wife. He saw the flames roaring up the chimney. He saw the lamp in the window. The clock on the rude mantelpiece pointed to four. He did not think of it then, but he had been

over four hours fighting the storm.

Warm and grateful indeed was the draught she gave him. She knelt beside him, murmuring soft endearments. She chafed his hands and feet. She called his name. He saw her face through a mist of weakness as she bent over him. And finally he saw the empty cradle, and by it the hanging little stocking.

The last words of the man by the wagon came to him suddenly. He raised himself up painfully and stared at his wife.

“The bundle—the baby—” he whispered.

The woman thought him distraught. She had laid the bundle on the bed, and had given it no thought in her fearful anxiety for her husband. She thought he referred to the child who was gone.

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The man divined her thought, too.

“No, no,” he said, “I brought him here.” His eyes wandered about the room. Then he pointed to the bundle. “The baby, there,” he added, with growing emphasis.

The woman spoke amazed, scarcely beginning to comprehend, thinking him mad, yet her heart throbbing with — with what? peace, hope, envy? Who knows?

“You don’t mean —”

“Yes,” he said, divining her thought, “it needs warmth, food —”

She turned instantly, unloosed the straps, tore away the blanket, and lifted from the swaddling wraps a tiny figure. Well and warmly had that dead mother dressed that little baby. It was numb with cold, and sleepy, but it was alive.

The woman took it to the fire; she

knelt by the side of the man and looked at him; then her eyes sought the baby's face as she chafed its tiny limbs and warmed it back to life.

"Back in the gulch," said the man, thickly, his lips still numb from cold, "emigrant wagon — man and woman — attacked by Indians. The woman was dead when I came, the man died; the baby was in the wagon; I brought it along."

The child opened its eyes. They were blue eyes, and its hair was golden. Blue-eyed and golden-haired had been her own child. Some faint color had come into the little cheeks. The little lips opened, and into the stillness of that room rose a shrill note, a baby's cry again!

Something stirred in the woman's heart. It was not her baby; one had been taken, another left. Strange

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jealousy and resentment throbbed in her bosom. She thrust the child away from her and stared at the man.

“It has no mother,” he said, “and it is so hungry.”

It was not her baby, but—thoughts too deep for words ran riot in her heart. Her soul quivered. Her full breast throbbed. The poor baby looked up at her with piteous appeal. She yearned toward it. The cry rose. It was so helpless, so cold, so hungry. Her hands fumbled at the bosom of her dress, slowly at first, but finally, with a passionate movement, she tore the remaining fastenings away, and even as He of the manger had done, the child drank. Its cry stilled. One little hand lay along her neck as of yore. The woman bent and looked into the baby’s face. Then she lifted up her

head as she drew the little form closer to her heart.

The man watched her. He forgot his pain. He saw her eyes brim, he saw the tears sparkle, he saw them fall silently as a rain of mercy down her face. They could hear the scream of the wind outside. Within was peace and some of the joy of Christmas Day, for unto them had a child been given.

THE END

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